

# Researching Post-emergency Recovery for Very Young Children

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## A Case Study from Myanmar

As part of a PhD research project<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Sithu Wai is researching ways to assess post emergency needs of young children affected by disasters and conflicts. The anticipated outcome is an enhanced assessment framework which takes into account holistic needs of young children and their families.

The investigation includes an assessment of the humanitarian response to the needs of young children, including ways in which community capacity and community resilience impacts the recovery process for children and families.

## Where the Project is Conducted

The project is conducted in the Irrawaddy Delta region of Myanmar, officially the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, which was devastated by a category IV cyclone (Nargis)

Myanmar is the second largest country on the mainland Southeast Asia. Cyclone Nargis, the deadliest cyclone in the history of Myanmar, battered Irrawaddy Delta on 2-3 May 2008. With wind intensity of over 200 kilometres per hour, the cyclone claimed about 140,000 lives (TCG, 2010) and severely affected about 2.4 million out of the 7.35 million living in the affected township (Lateef, 2009).

## Target Respondents

The research project was conducted in 2011, three years after the cyclone. The project targets children who were 2 – 4 years of age at the time of the disaster. With the focus on the affected children, now aged 5 – 7 years, the research involves gathering data from caregivers, community leaders and key service providers through the use

1. Sithu Wai's PhD project is being supervised by Professor Jacqueline Hayden and Dr. Katey De Gioia from Macquarie University, Institute of Early Childhood.

of interviews and focus group discussions.

## Why Focus on the Young?

Young children are undergoing profound physical, mental, social and spiritual development during the early years of life. Disruption during these years can have long term effects on every aspect of development: acute and chronic consequences are inevitable (Babugura, 2008). Acute risks include mortality, malnutrition, diseases, stunting, impaired cognitive and psychomotor development, behavioural problems, low educational attainment, delayed academic progress and, in the long term, poor career achievement resulting in loss of income potential and other aspects of quality life well into adulthood.

Essential life support measures such as water, sanitation, shelter and food are critical for survival of children but they are not enough to mitigate the impact of disasters on the development of children (Aguilar & Retamal, 2009).

However, there is a profound gap in our knowledge about effective aid programmes for very young children (Christoplos, 2006).

## Why the Need for a New Framework?

Current guidelines and checklists for need assessments being used by non-government organisations are useful for short term relief but tend to lack focus on impact outcomes of injury, death, livelihood disruption and difficulty in recovery (Blaikie, Cannon, Davis, & Wisner, 2003). Recent research suggests that disaster response should incorporate not only rapid need assessments and damages but also assessment of existing social systems and local capacities for the purpose of rebuilding communities, which can in turn help prevent child morbidity, including long term psychosocial outcomes following disasters (Torjesen, 2007).

This focus calls for new assessment tools and/or a different framework which can

incorporate holistic assessment including exploring needs, vulnerabilities, capacities and interactions among children and families affected by a disaster or crisis and humanitarian aid programmes.

## An Enhanced Framework - VACS

As part of the research project, Dr. Wai has developed a framework (VACS) which covers assessment of short and longer term needs of young children following a disaster or emergency.

The framework incorporates a holistic investigation of strengths, capacities, needs and vulnerabilities which are not included in other assessment tools. Most importantly, the framework specifically targets young children, who are often left out of other assessment activities.

The VACS framework consists of four components. These are:

- Vulnerability analysis (V)
- AGIRI<sup>2</sup> or stakeholder analysis (A)
- Community analysis (C)
- Strategy analysis (S)

These components are described below.

*Vulnerability analysis* addresses seven components of human security (or safety). These are:

1. Economic security
2. Food security
3. Health security
4. Environmental security
5. Personal security
6. Community security
7. Political security

Each of these will be applied to conditions for young children and families.

2. The name AGIRI analysis represent assessment and analysis of stakeholders in terms of Agents, Goals, Interactions, Resources, Institutions.

*AGIRI analysis* (also known as *stakeholder analysis*) assesses external response capacity. Since coordination among various stakeholders is frequently identified as one of the most difficult barriers in delivering targeted, effective aid, this analysis incorporates coordination, resource mobilisation and strategic planning – again, with a focus on the needs of young children.

*Community analysis* incorporates participatory assessment tools to investigate community structures and capacities, coping mechanisms and response programmes. Community readiness assessments are also included under this category (Plested, Edwards, & Jumper-Thurman, 2005).

*Strategy analysis* collates information acquired during vulnerability, stakeholder (AGIRI) and community analyses in order to identify holistic response programmes for reducing vulnerabilities of children and families. The focus of strategy analyses is on the activities and programmes of stakeholders and possible interactions of these activities with other human security components.

## How and Where the Framework is Being Tested?

The research project is being conducted in five communities affected by the 2008 Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar. Through a variety of sources, and using the VACS framework as guide, information about the emergency response for young children will be gathered. The data will be compared with information which had been generated through conventional assessment tools such as the Initial Rapid Assessment by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee<sup>3</sup>, Post-Nargis

Joint Assessment (PONJA)<sup>4</sup>, and others.

The comparison will reveal the strengths and gaps in terms of generating information about young children and their families which can inform appropriate and effective post emergency responses. Findings from this study will be validated through a survey of global experts on ECD and emergencies.

## Expected Outcomes of the Project

The enhanced framework will fulfil an identified need for ensuring that young children are included in emergency response assessments and program targets.

The project will identify strengths and weaknesses of current humanitarian programmes in conducting critical analyses. The information provided by this framework will be of use in humanitarian coordination and planning (for example, in cluster meetings), resource allocations (for example, by donors) and humanitarian evaluations in the future disasters or emergencies.

Most importantly, the use of the framework will assist in improving conditions and experiences of children and families affected by disasters/emergencies.

## Additional Information

At the time of submission of this article, the research project has developed the VACS framework and study tools for case study as guided by the framework. The case study, in five communities (villages) in Myanmar, is expected to be completed by the end of 2011. Initial findings are expected to be available by mid-2012.

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3. The Multi-sectoral Initial Rapid Assessment (IRA) Tool was the tool developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) global Health, Nutrition and WASH Clusters in 2006-2009. The tool aims to provide faster and better multi-sector rapid assessment in the first few days of a sudden-onset crisis in order to guide the initial planning of urgent humanitarian interventions, identify needs for follow up assessments, and inform initial funding decisions (IASC, 2007).

4. Post Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) was an assessment conducted by the Tripartite Core Group (TCG), comprised of representatives of the Government of Myanmar (GoUM), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations (UN) and ASEAN, in the Ayeyarwaddy and Yangon Divisions, Myanmar to determine the full scale of the impact of Cyclone Nargis and the requirements for both immediate humanitarian assistance needs and medium to longer term recovery (TCG, 2008).